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ABSTRACT

A recent survey indicates a substantial degree of homogeneity in the content of introductory economic principles courses. Although community college instructors seem more likely than their four-year institution counterparts to experiment with course content and format, there is an evident need for teaching reform in the profession as a whole. In order to encourage experimentation in the teaching of economic principles, the Joint Council on Economic Education, in conjunction with the Committee on Economic Education of the American Economic Association, began pilot programs to provide instructors at eight institutions with experimental resource materials. Only six of these schools completed course development, involving the development of a course outline, course syllabus, evaluation procedures, and methods of student testing. This document reviews the individual course content and approach taken by each of the participating institutions: Florida State University, Indiana University, Oklahoma State University, Vanderbilt University, University of Colorado, and University of Wisconsin. (NHM)

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A SURVEY OF ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES TO INTRODUCTORY ECONOMICS

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A Survey of Alternative Approaches to Introductory Economics

Much has been said in recent years concerning the introductory economics course. Charges ranging from dull and highly abstract all the way to indecipherable have been leveled directly at the course by students as well as members of the profession. Economists have individually and collectively devoted substantial time and effort in search of relevant and interesting approaches to teaching the principles of economics. As early as 1955, Rendigs Fels was voicing concern over relevance and approach.[1] In 1969, the well-known Haley Report was commissioned with the following conclusion:

> "It is evident that a considerable amount of experimentation with different types of introductory courses and different teaching techniques is going on. To some extent this experimentation may simply reflect a desire to make an already good product even better. But certainly to some extent it is based on the conviction that the present-day introductory course is by no means satisfactory with respect to either content or method of presentation.
>
> One good reason for experimentation with the content of the introductory course is the conviction, on the part of many of those concerned with the course, that it often undertakes to cover too much territory, to serve too many different purposes for different groups of students, and tends to be too technical and excessively involved with theoretical refinements."[2]

James Koscielniak's recent survey indicates a substantial degree of homogeneity among teaching economists in regard to content of the introductory course.[3] Supply and Demand, Product Markets (i.e. pure competition, monopoly, oligopoly etc.), National Income Accounts, Monetary and Fiscal Policy, Factor Markets, Consumer Choice and International Trade appear to be included in a predominance of principles courses. Community college instructors exhibited tendencies to add units on history of economic thought, current economic problems and comparative economic systems, more often than their four-year institution counterparts.

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[1] Fels, Rendigs, "On Teaching Elementary Economics" (American Economic Review. December, 1955. pp. 419-930.)

[2] Haley, Bernard F., Experiments in the Teaching of Basic Economics (Joint Council on Economic Education. 1212 Avenue of the Americas, New York, New York 10036.)

[3] Koscielniak, James, The Nature of Introductory Economics Courses (A.A.C.J.C. Quarterly, Fall 1975. pp. 52-82.)

Surprisingly, two-year community college faculty deviate more often from the standard lecture-discussion format than their four-year counterparts.

Koscielniak states:

> "Ninety-five percent of the instructors surveyed use lecture, lecture-discussion or lecture-discussion modes reinforced with programmed materials, audiovisual aids or both in presenting introductory economics courses. Four-year colleges and universities tended to use traditional lecture or lecture-discussion modes more often than two-year community colleges.
>
> Economic structure, theory, and problems are attacked from the approach of macroeconomics and microeconomics by ninety-four percent of the instructors responding to the survey. The remaining six percent approached economics through a perspective of history, current problems, and a mixture of related principles without clear reference to macro or microeconomics."[4]

I suggest that at least a portion of the responsibility for the homogeneity of approach to introductory economics stems from the content of available textbooks. Koscielniak's sample indicates that Samuelson, McConnell, Spencer, Miller and Heilbronner were predominate texts in his area. While most would hold these texts in high esteem, the fact remains that they do not deviate significantly from one another in content or approach. If the market is to change, then it is clear that the materials used in the principles course must also change.

Because of the Haley Report, the Joint Council, in conjunction with the Committee on Economic Education of the American Economic Association, began experimental programs at eight institutions. These experiments were designed to help both two and four-year college faculty to do what they had not in the past had the time or resources to do. The primary objective was not to design 'the' introductory course, but to place in the hands of the profession, resource materials of benefit to already overburdened college professors which they could adapt to their own needs and situations. It was also hoped that the project would demonstrate by way of example how colleges and universities might undertake and evaluate their own effort.

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[4] Op. Cit., Koscielniak, James

It was felt that the program would be successful if several prototype courses were developed and used, if commercial publishers showed interest in the courses, if there were evidence that interest among the profession was stimulated and if the successful experiments could be replicated at other colleges and universities.

SELECTION OF SCHOOLS

In any experimental program it is unlikely that all attempts will succeed. Realizing this, in its initial stages the J.C.E.E. project involved a substantial number of institutions all attempting to develop new alternative approaches. The Council selected more schools than it could sustain over the life of the project in the belief that after a review procedure only those most promising would be retained. With the expected attrition complete, six institutions produced products worthy of recognition and support. *

Development of these courses was broken down into six separate and distinct Phases. Phase one and two involved the development of preliminary course outlines and class testing. This was completed by the six institutions on or before January 1, 1972. Phase three involved indepth evaluation of student achievement. This effort utilized forms of the Test of Understanding in College Economics and was completed by all participants on or before June 30, 1973.

With the input generated from preliminary class testing and the evaluation procedures, preliminary course syllabi were constructed in phase four. These units received further classroom scrutiny and were also presented at various professional meetings. The Florida State Course was discussed at the annual meeting of the Southern Economic Association in November of 1973. The courses prepared by Colorado, Indiana, Oklahoma State and Vanderbilt were presented at the American Economic Association meeting in December 1973. Arising from this procedure was a noticeable increase in commitment by the profession to improve the introductory course.

* Florida State University, Indiana University, Oklahoma State University, University of Colorado, Vanderbilt University, and University of Wisconsin.

Phase five involved revision of the course syllabi and was completed by participants by December 31, 1973. The final phase of the project was the evaluation of revised syllabi and preparation of completed drafts. By the fall of 1974, these goals were accomplished.

Review of individual course content and approach:

1. FLORIDA STATE The Florida State course uses economic history and history of economic thought as a base on which to build an understanding of economic concepts and principles. The program incorporates several significant features in approaching the principles of economics course. Most notable of these was the fact that a completely organized and structured course outline was distributed to students upon entering the class. This outline offered day-by-day and topic-by-topic direction to the student in regard to the course.

A second feature was the use of the "Council on Economic Policy." A major problem arising in the principles of economics course is getting students to be able to relate concepts and principles to realistic situations. Thus, the purpose of the CEP is to provide each student with an awareness of how for example, macroeconomic concepts relate to the very real problems faced by economic policy-makers. The students receive a "Memorandum" containing instruction on what materials to read to learn about economic issues. This is accompanied by a course outline (mentioned above) with a set of readings and an employment form appointing the student to the CEP. The latter requests information on the student's past work history and is used by the instructor to generate discussion in the lecture section.

The CEP provides a theme used to tie the course together. The reality is brought home when the students are given a memo from a rather perplexed "president" who lacking an economics background, urgently requests information on the meaning of the GNP measure. It is reinforced by a memo from the chief coordinator requesting information on why the growth rate of the U.S. has been slower than

that of some other countries. Subsequent in-class memos deal with humorous stories or problems which puzzle the "president" and his staff and the class is invited to draft a reply to each question. At the end of the course each student receives a "Certificate of Appreciation" for contributing to national policy.

Content-Weighted Core Examinations: A fundamental principle of the examination program is that the questions on each exam are chosen to reflect the weight given to the material actually covered in the course. The questions contained on each exam are chosen to reflect these weights directly in the construction of the exam. Thus, the students can be tested to determine how well they grasped the knowledge which the instructor conveyed during the course of the quarter.

Student evaluations requested at the end of the course have thus far favored the new approach.

II. INDIANA UNIVERSITY The innovative approach developed at Indiana University for the Joint Council stems from work done by Dr. Phillip Saunders. In this approach, Saunders designed a course based upon four psychological foundations of learning theory. Motivation, prompt accurate feedback, relevancy, and retention through active response were built into the course structure.

Saunders was primarily concerned with producing lasting student learning. It was hoped that students five years after they had left the course would be able to deal with Economic problems and issues in an orderly analytical manner. The educational objectives of the course focused on student behavior rather than subject matter content. There were four specific objectives:

1. To develop an awareness of, and a continuing interest in major economic problems of modern society.
2. To give students a firm grasp of the few basic principles and analytical tools they must have to think intelligently about economic problems. Technical theoretical detail was sacrificed in order to obtain proficiency in the use of the basic analytical tool kit.

3. To help students develop good methods in thinking about economic problems. This involves specific attention to the process of orderly problem solving.
4. To help students learn to evaluate and use both qualitative and quantitative evidence when conflicting points of view are encountered.

The course content, although traditional in nature, stresses several tools of microeconomic analysis and applies them to a full spectrum of problems. It then moves to a longer section on macroeconomics and again stresses problem solving. The course concludes with problems which require a combination of micro and macroeconomic analysis.

The core readings are in a standard textbook: application to problems involves a variety of readings which can vary according to instructor preferences, but they will include conflicting points of view and focus on decisions.

III. OKLAHOMA STATE The issues-oriented principles course at Oklahoma State University replaced a traditional three-hour credit course in economic principles. Thus, it became an integral part of a six-hour credit principles program over a two-semester period with issues stressed in one semester.

At the inception of the issues course it was agreed that formal economic analysis would not be stressed. Economic concepts and principles would be limited with nothing more difficult than simple supply and demand analysis. The objectives of the new course were to create interest in economics and to arouse a desire on the part of students to pursue it further.

A central idea behind the development of an issues course was the belief that students learn more when the subject matter is interesting and relevant and when what they are supposed to learn is repeated by means of a learning process involving contemporary social issues. Thus, a "set of issues" were developed with this idea in mind: namely, a set of concepts and principles would be used over and over again in a set of issues until its elements were firmly established in stu-

dent's minds.

In each issue certain elementary economic principles and concepts basic to the analysis of the issue are introduced, explained and applied. The issues themselves unlike many so-called issue books, are organized so as to facilitate a systematic development of principles and concepts. Issues are selected which are thought to be interesting and stimulating, and which lend themselves to learning economics. Each issue is approached as follows: (1) the nature of the problem is presented generally from the viewpoint of the public; (2) the economic aspects of the problem are introduced showing how economists conceive the problem; (3) basic economic concepts and principles are developed; (4) basic economic tools are applied to the issue and policy proposals suggested from the economic analysis.

IV. VANDERBILT UNIVERSITY The Vanderbilt experimental course is concerned with the adaption of the case method to economics. The essence of the case method as used in business schools and law schools consists of requiring students to think through real-world problems for themselves. In economics, this would involve developing skills in thinking through conclusions on policy issues in a systematic way.

The case method can be used in conjunction with an otherwise conventional course. Cases are used for class discussion, term papers, and quiz questions in combination with a standard textbook and lectures.

Although the case method has worked well as part of a conventional course, it calls for a greater mastery of economic principles than elementary students are commonly accustomed to.

The objective of mastering principles is achieved by combining the case method with the self-paced personalized system of instruction (PSI) pioneered by Fred S. Keller. In PSI, there are virtually no lectures. Students are given an assignment, study it with the help of a proctor, and take a test when they think they are ready. The criterion for passing is mastery -- seventy percent is not acceptable. Students who pass go on to the next assignment. Those who do not pass,

restudy the assignment and take another test. Grades depend on how many assignments are completed.

Although use of of PSI in economics has been limited till now, it has been used extensively in other fields. The nearly universal conclusion in the published literature is that most students like PSI. They learn at least as much as in conventional instruction. Often they learn significantly more.

The great advantage of PSI lies in the powerful incentives it gives students. They know exactly what they have to do to get an A or a B or a C; they know they will not be graded on a curve. PSI avoids adverse effects on morale from failure. In addition, PSI permits students to work at their own pace. Still another advantage is the amount of personal contact between student and instructor. Freed from the need to prepare and give regular lectures, the instructor devotes time to the individual needs of students.

Unlike many systems of personalized instruction, the Vanderbilt case study methods clearly defines student procedures and expectations. Each student is provided detailed objectives for each case along with a study guide and sample tests. The sample tests clearly delineate both the composition and organization at an acceptable answer. Objectives point out to the student just what is expected of him in each case and the study guide serves to bridge the gap between problem and solution. The Vanderbilt case study approach is a highly organized and well-elaborated system of instruction.

V. UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO The University of Colorado course uses analysis of social economic indicators to teach an understanding of basic economics. The relationship between the individual and the actions and reactions of his society is examined in an effort to explain the need for social measurements. Without mention of economics, the student is shown why it is necessary to examine and measure the behavior of society. To overcome deficiencies and plot courses of action which benefit the greatest number of individuals, the student acquaints himself with the macro concept.

From this introduction, the course proceeds through a wide variety of exercises which introduce the student to problems of information collection and analysis. Modules utilizing national income statistics are particularly useful. Analysis of a concept entitled "Gross Capacity Product" (what GNP would have been in the absence of unemployment) gives students insight into social measurements beyond that of mere goods and services.

Time series analysis of sociological data is used to compare improvements in family life style, health, education and culture with their accompanying increase in personal, social and economic costs. From such analysis, implications for future economic and social growth arise in the students' minds. They have an understanding of systems where individual decisions are often dependent upon the decisions of society.

One of the important goals of the course is to enable students to simultaneously develop a feeling for societies as total interacting systems and yet locate the role played by their society and themselves as individuals in the total system.

At the same time, students are introduced to the macro concept, the simulation game "SIMSOC" enters the course. This module involves the student creating a new society from scratch. They are immediately confronted with resource scarcity, limited communication, natural catastrophies and the effects of these conditions on the social processes. Exploitation, cooperation, competition, trust and mistrust within the simulated society clearly point out to the student a relationship between social structure and behavior.

The course is climaxed by the student being called upon to generate a set of tentative projections concerning the future plight of his society.

VI. UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN The modular format system utilized at the University of Wisconsin breaks the introductory course into several components. Initially, all introductory students are required to attend a basic four-week unit on tools of analysis in microeconomics. An agreed upon collection of analy-

tical concepts is taught to all micro students by their respective faculty members. Several very large lecture sections are taught by a senior faculty member.

Once the foundation for economic analysis is laid the students select topical issues sections provided by the department. The faculty are assigned 2 to 3 week seminars in the area of their speciality. Each student is required to attend at least two sections of his choice from the six to eight departmental offerings. Examinations are standarized across the department for both the four-week tools section and each of the speciality sections. Grades are assigned in a cumulative manner by points earned in the topical sections through application of the tools. The basic content structure is duplicated within the macro portion of the course.

This type of course structure offers several significant benefits. First, in giving the students a choice among course content, a more positive attitude may be generated. Clearly, a positive attitude on the part of the student contributes positively to the learning process. Second, the use of faculty resources is more efficient under such a structure. Since faculty members present 2 to 3 week sections on topics within their respective specialities, each faculty member can now exercise his comparative advantage. There is also a noted improvement in faculty attitude in that some of the repetative drudgery of the principles course is removed.

CONCLUSION

The experimental project has accomplished several major goals since its inception in 1972. Six high-quality course syllabi have been produced to facilitate better college teaching in introductory economics. The work of the project and the syllabi themselves have received extensive reporting at professional and special meetings nationwide. Results of the project have met with considerable enthusiasm generating the formation of economic associations in several states. These groups clearly reflect an awakening of departmental awareness as to what has to be done in the introductory course.

It is hoped that the experimental syllabi can serve as a vehicle for change.

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